

EKS named Small Business of the Month

By Alex B. Heeb

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ALTON — The River-Bend Growth Association has selected Elias, Kallal and Schaaf Funeral Home as their Small Business of the Month.

Craig Schaaf, who co-owns the chain homes with partner Tim Kallal, said they were surprised but pleased to receive the designation.

"It's awesome, and we are very appreciative of it," Schaaf said. "It's truly an honor to be selected as

the Small Business of the Month."

The company, which has been founded by Schaaf and Kallal in 2002, has grown to six funeral homes through a series of mergers and acquisitions. They operate four funeral homes in Madison County — two in Alton, and one each in Bethalto and Godfrey — and with the recent acquisition of another funeral services company, they now serve Hardin and Brussels in Calhoun County, in

addition to Pearl in Pike County.

While working with people at a difficult juncture can make the job challenging, Kallal said he believes the work they do can help families be more comfortable as they sort through their grief.

"I love to help families to get them through the hardest times of their life," Kallal said, "and if I can make it just a little bit easier and help them manage through the very difficult times."

In particular, they

believe funerals should be tailored towards helping the grieving find closure. Beyond this, they offer several support groups for surviving relatives.

"The funeral is for the living, and it gives you that peace of mind that your loved one is at rest," Schaaf said. "I tend to find that people that do immediate cremation and don't say goodbye to tend to struggle a little more."

According to Schaaf, their company employs about 17 people full-time, and another 25 on a part-

time basis. Having several funeral homes creates an economy of scale, he said, which takes pressure off staff.

"It does help because at a small facility you have yourself and maybe an employee, or maybe not, and you are on call 24/7, 365," he said. "We have five funeral directors and four apprentices and we can spread out the calls, but we also have more volume than small firms so our chances of going out are greater."

While there is a pos-

sibility the company will make more acquisitions — particularly, Schaaf said, if small funeral homes are willing to transition their staff during the sale — the company for now is focused on serving its customers.

"We love the community that we serve, that's for sure," Kallal said. "I love to help families."

"If I can make it just a little bit easier, I feel like we've done something."

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